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The Eucharist, the Word and the Bishop

*A Patristic Reflection
upon Inter-Communion*



By Father Michael Azkoul

genuine alarm. The ecclesiological implications of these actions are momentous. Either these Patriarchs and their Holy Synods believe that the heterodox are a "church" or that the Eucharist may be given to heretics despite their separation from the Church. Neither position is justifiable if we accept the biblical, patristic and the Oberlin witness to the Apostolic Tradition.

Under such circumstances, moreover, it is difficult to see how "World Orthodoxy" can avoid the conclusion that it is now in communion with heresy. I am most curious to understand how it will justify its extra-doctrinal, extra-canonical actions and the criteria which it will use to reconcile its position with traditional Orthodox ecclesiology. Personally, I can no longer consider "World Orthodoxy" as Orthodox. I am still pondering the question: if an Orthodox bishop condones and ratifies the "Balamand Statement" and the agreement with the "Oriental Churches,"—that is, if he remains in communion with those who condone and ratify these statements—is he not in communion with heresy? Would it not be possible for me to convert to Roman Catholicism or the "non-Chalcedonian" Coptic "Church" and still remain Orthodox—inasmuch as the Eucharist defines the limits of the Church?

Is it not to Ecumenism to which we must assign these lamentable developments within World Orthodoxy? Does not communion with World Orthodoxy's jurisdictions now separate us, alas, from the Church, from Christ Himself?

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EDITOR'S NOTE:—

Since this patristically grounded article was first published in 1969, another landmark has been canonically introduced, viz. The *Anathema Against Ecumenism* of 1983. It was unanimously signed by all the bishops of the Holy Synod of the Russian Church Outside of Russia under the Presidency of the New Confessor, Saint Philaret of New York. At that time the aforementioned Holy Synod directed that this *Anathema* be added to the *Synodicon of Orthodoxy*. The text of this *Anathema* is to be found in *The True Vine*, Nos. 27 & 28, Spring 2000, pp 71ff; please see also p. 72 n. 93 of the same issue.

Put under Anathema are all those

"...who do not distinguish the priesthood and mysteries of the Church from those of the heretics, but say that the baptism and eucharist of heretics is effectual for salvation..."

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Apostolic Tradition—and Protestants—who have subtracted from it—are in the Church, then, the whole question of Inter-communion may be viewed by the Orthodox as nothing more than a canonical problem”.

But, then, such an attitude must be taken as a radical revision of traditional Orthodox ecclesiology. The Eucharist, the Word and the Bishop are three dimensions of the same reality, the *sine qua non* of the Church, that without which there can be no Church.

The Orthodox Church cannot give Papists and Protestants Holy Communion, because they are “heretics”, that is, not members of the Church by virtue of their doctrinal deficiencies which deny to them, consequently, both the Bishop and the Eucharist. In a word, the idea of Intercommunion is theological nonsense. As the Orthodox representatives at Oberlin declared in 1957:

“Communion in worship is only possible in the unity of faith. Communion presupposes Unity. Therefore, the term “Inter-communion” seems to us an epitome of that conception we are compelled to reject. An inter-communion presupposes the existence of several separate or separated denominations which join occasionally in certain acts or actions. In the true Unity of Christ’s Church, there is no room for several “denominations”. There is, therefore, no room for “inter-communion”.

Under such circumstances, moreover, it is difficult to see how the Antiochian Orthodox Church, recognizing the ostensible “mysteries” of the Monophysites, can avoid the conclusion that she is in communion with them. I am curious to watch her justify this inter-communion with the so called “Orientals” who condemn the Fourth Ecumenical Council, as well as all of the subsequent Ecumenical Councils. How will she treat the canons that forbid even prayer with these heretics? Shall we call the Antiochian jurisdiction Orthodox despite her contempt for Orthodox ecclesiology? She will not admit, of course, that she has Ecumenism to thank for this innovative understanding of the heterodox, for this new relationship with the “Orientals” or “non-Chalcedonians.”

It takes no master logician to identify Ecumenism as responsible for the growing disunity in Orthodoxy, the subversion of the Faith, the corruption of the Truth, the apostasy of bishops, and blasphemy against the Eucharist—a tragedy in which the Antiochian Orthodox Church is in the forefront.

Taking into consideration all these facts, we must view the recent sacramental concessions of “World Orthodoxy” to the heterodox with

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Are there any conditions under which the non-Orthodox may be given the Holy Communion of the Orthodox Church? Is “inter-communion” possible, that is, may Orthodox and heretic share a common Eucharist?

Before we can answer these questions, we must resolve a few others: What is the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church? Why does the Eucharist exist? Who are members of the Church?

I think all Orthodox will agree that Christ instituted the Eucharist. He gave the Eucharist to the Church through the Apostles as the sign and seal of unity with Him (JN. VI, 52-57). It is also true—if we may trust the Gospel narratives—that faith (*pistis*) and love (*agape*) are presupposed as something intrinsic to that unity in the Sacrament (MARK XIV, 24).

In other words, the Eucharist is central to our very understanding of the Church. The Church is the fellowship of believers organically united to a high priest (bishop) for the purpose of hearing the divine truth (word) which unites the whole people in the Eucharist, that is, Christ.

As St. Ignatius of Antioch puts it:

“Come together in common, one and all without exception in love (*agape*), in one faith and in one Jesus Christ—so that with undivided mind you may obey the bishop and the priests, and break one Bread which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote to death, enabling us to live forever in Jesus Christ” (EP. AD EPH., 20).

Again, he says:



Apart from the bishop, let no one perform any function pertaining to the Church. Let the Eucharist be held true which is offered by the bishop or one to whom the bishop has committed this charge. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" (*EN. AD SMYR.*, 8).

For a "true Eucharist" Saint Ignatius is careful to insist upon "true doctrine":

"Make no mistake, brethren. No one who follows another into schism inherits the Kingdom of God. No one who follows heretical doctrine is on the side of the Passion. Be zealous, therefore, in the observance of the Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one chalice that brings union in His Blood. There is one altar, one bishop" (*EP. AD PHIL.*, 3-4).

According to the disciple of Saint John the Evangelist and successor to Saint Peter, only the Church has a Eucharist and the so-called Communion of heretics is "foreign fodder":

"For the heretics mingle poison with Jesus Christ as men might administer a deadly drug in sweet wine, without giving hint of their wickedness. Thus, without thought or fear of the fatal sweetness a man drinks his own death" (*EP. AD TRAL.*, 4).

He exhorts the Trallians to eschew heretics and "keep close to Jesus Christ and the Bishop and the ordinances of the Apostles".

The writings of Saint Ignatius makes it very clear that heretics are not members of the Church and that their "eucharist" is but a parody of the Church's Eucharist.

Two centuries later, the Latin Father, often considered Saint Ignatius' "Western counter-part", Saint Cyprian of Carthage also had some interesting things to say about "the Eucharist, the Word and the Bishop". He calls the Eucharist, "the sacrament of unity", for as the "union of many grains" makes one bread and as the wine which is "pressed from many grapes" makes one chalice, so the Eucharist symbolizes "the unity of God's people". Participation in the Body and Blood of Christ announces the oneness of the Church (*Ep.*, LXXV, 6). It is a "oneness" in the bishop (*Ep.* LXVIII, 8).

From the unity of God's Church— and from Her Mysteries—he is separated who "divides the Church, destroys the faith, disturbs the peace, dissipates charity, profanes the sacrament" (*DE UNIT. ECCL.*, 15). Essential to that "unity", Cyprian states, is "the bishop", "the sacrament" and "the apostolic tradition". It is the Devil who seeks to negate these three dimensions of the Church



by inventing "heresies and schisms, whereby he might subvert the faith, might corrupt the truth, might divide unity".

It is evident from the writings of Saint Ignatius and Saint Cyprian—indeed, from all the Fathers—that without the Eucharist there is no Church; but there can be no Eucharist without the bishop and he is not a bishop who does not believe and teach "the faith once delivered to the saints" (*SEE CANON I OF THE 7TH EC. COUNCIL.*).

For these reasons, then, Saint John of Damascus, in his summary of patristic doctrine, wrote:

"For since we partake of one Bread, we all become one Body with Christ; and one Blood, and members of one another, being one with Christ. With all our strength, therefore, let us beware lest we receive Communion from or give it to heretics. 'Give not what is holy to the dogs, says the Lord. Neither cast your pearl before swine', lest we become partakers in their dishonor and condemnation. For if union is in truth with Christ and with one another, we are assuredly voluntarily united also with all those who partake with us" (*DE FID. ORTH.* IV, 13).

In other words, to share "the one Body and Blood" with non-Orthodox is to admit heresy into the Church, to "subvert the faith", "corrupt the truth" and to "divide unity".

There is no Father of the Church, Greek or Latin, who would agree to share Holy Communion with heretics. Not because the Church is unmerciful, but because the Eucharist exists for Her children, for the fellowship united around the bishop "in truth and love". To partake of Holy Communion with heretics is to reject the very reason for which, the condition under which, the Eucharist exists.

Of course, if one does not confess that Orthodoxy is precisely the Church and concedes that the Papacy—which has added to the